

You're doing well without me

—"I know that's not the case, that it's over

But I still keep, Holding onto you with the same force."

William

The day before my exhibition opened, I woke to a silence so complete it felt like drowning. Not the peaceful silence of rest—the particular quiet that comes when you've been alone so long that even the apartment stops making noise, as if the walls themselves have learned that no one is listening.—and I stared at the ceiling crack that had been my companion through three years of hiding.

Tomorrow.

The word sat in my chest like a stone I couldn't swallow. Twenty-four hours from now, I would be standing in a gallery surrounded by strangers, watching them examine the most vulnerable parts of me rendered in oil and canvas. Twenty-four hours from now, I would have to give a speech—words I'd written and rewritten and still couldn't get right—explaining what "Absence & Light" meant, as if meaning could be articulated, as if grief could be translated into language that made sense.

Twenty-four hours from now, Est would be there with his camera, documenting everything.

And I still had no idea what to say to him.

I turned my head to check the clock on my nightstand. 8:47 AM. The morning light was gray through my curtains—Bangkok's pollution filtering the sun into something softer, more forgiving. I watched the way it changed as the minutes passed, the gradual brightening that meant the world was waking up whether I wanted it to or not.

The apartment was quiet in the way it always was—the particular silence of a space designed for one person who rarely spoke. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, Bangkok spread out beneath me like a map of lives I wasn't living. I used to find comfort in that view. The distance it represented. The glass between me and everything else.

Now it just reminded me of all the ways I'd failed to connect.

I thought about Est constantly. Even now, lying in bed with the weight of tomorrow pressing down on me, my mind circled back to him like water finding its lowest point. The painting I'd sent him—his hands, holding a rose—was in his apartment now. I'd wrapped it myself, written a letter that had taken seventeen drafts, sent it with my heart in my throat and my hands shaking so badly I'd had to sit down afterward.

He'd responded. Briefly. Kindly.

Thank you. Keep trying

Three words that meant everything and nothing. Three words that left the door cracked open without inviting me through. I wondered constantly what he'd done with it. Whether he'd hung it somewhere—in his living room, maybe, or his bedroom, or the corner of his apartment where the morning light fell best. Whether he'd looked at it once and put it in a closet, unable to bear the evidence of my attention. Whether he'd studied it the way I'd studied him, searching for meaning in the brushstrokes, trying to understand what I'd been trying to say.

The hands in that painting were so careful. I'd spent hours getting them right—the particular way his fingers curled around the stem, gentle but confident, the way someone might hold something precious without crushing it. The way I remembered him holding his camera. The particular gentleness of his touch when he'd adjusted my collar before a shot, his fingers brushing against my neck so briefly I might have imagined it.

The way his fingers had felt against my face that night before everything fell apart.

I'd painted those hands because I couldn't stop thinking about them. Because during the worst of my isolation, the image of Est's hands had been one of the few things that made me want to create again. Because I needed him to know that even when I was drowning, even when I was pushing everyone away, I was still paying attention to something gentle. But I didn't know if he understood. Didn't know if any of it had reached him.

Keep trying.

I was trying. Every day, I was trying. But trying didn't mean succeeding. And tomorrow, I would have to face him—camera raised, professional distance in place, documenting the most exposed night of my life—and I had no idea how to exist in his presence without falling apart.

Eventually, the stillness became unbearable. I forced myself to sit up, to swing my legs over the side of the bed, to plant my feet on the cool floor. The physical sensations grounded me—the texture of the carpet, the weight of my body, the particular ache in my shoulders from another restless night.

You are here, I reminded myself. You are present. You are alive

The words had become a mantra over months of therapy. A way of pulling myself back when the dissociation threatened to swallow me whole.

The bathroom mirror showed me a face I was still learning to recognize. Not the hollow-eyed ghost I'd been six months ago—that particular version of myself felt

distant now, like a photograph of someone I used to know. But not quite whole either. Something in between. A man midway through a transformation he wasn't sure he wanted to complete.

My hair was too long. It fell across my forehead in tangled strands, obscuring my eyes, making me look younger and more unkempt than I wanted to appear at my own exhibition. I'd been meaning to get it cut for weeks, but the idea of sitting in a salon chair while a stranger touched my head had been too much to contemplate. Maybe Lego could help. He was supposed to come over this afternoon—he'd been texting all week about preparations, about what I should wear, about making sure I was ready. Maybe he'd have a solution.

I turned on the shower and waited for the water to heat, watching steam gradually fog the glass.

Tomorrow, I would have to give a speech.

The thought made my hands shake. I'd written it weeks ago—or rather, I'd written seventeen versions of it, each one worse than the last. The current draft sat on my desk, printed and annotated, the margins filled with my anxious handwriting. I'd practiced it in front of the mirror. I'd recorded myself reading it and listened back, cringing at the sound of my own voice. I'd sent it to my manager for approval and received a polite email saying it was "very moving" in a way that made me certain she was lying.

The speech was supposed to explain the exhibition. Supposed to give context to "Absence & Light," to help the audience understand what they were seeing. But how do you explain three years of isolation? How do you articulate the particular weight of grief, the way it settles into your bones, the slow process of learning to carry it instead of being crushed by it?

I'd written about my mother. About the flowers that had sustained me during the worst of it—Lego's Wednesday visits, the bright blooms that kept appearing even when I couldn't name them, couldn't understand them, could only paint them as evidence of a love I didn't deserve.

I'd written about healing. About the unglamorous work of showing up to therapy sessions and taking medication and trying, again and again, to become someone different than the person who had hidden from the world.

I hadn't written about Est.

I couldn't. Not in words that would be spoken aloud in front of strangers. The things I wanted to say to him were too raw, too private, too likely to break me open in ways I couldn't afford on a night when I needed to seem functional. But he would be there. Camera in hand. Documenting everything. And I would have to find a way to exist in his presence without falling apart.

After the shower, I found myself in the studio. The room was empty now—all the paintings gone, transported to the gallery three weeks ago, arranged on walls I'd walked past during my trial run. But I could still smell the oil paint, could still see the ghost-marks on the floor where canvases had been stacked. The room held the memory of everything I'd created there, even if the physical evidence was elsewhere. I stood in the center of the space, turning slowly, taking in the emptiness.

For three years, this room had been my sanctuary. The place where I could lose myself in color and texture, where the chaos in my head could find expression on canvas. I'd painted for hours, sometimes days, barely sleeping, barely eating, letting the work consume me because consumption was easier than feeling.

The paintings that had come from those frenzied nights were now hanging in a gallery, waiting to be judged by strangers. The violence and grief and desperate hope I'd poured into them—all of it exposed. All of it public.

I thought about the portrait I'd called "I'm Sorry." It was hanging in the gallery now—Est's face rendered in loose charcoal strokes, half-finished, caught between sketch and painting. Black, white, grays. No color. I'd been planning to add the amber around his eyes, the particular warmth of his skin in afternoon light. I'd been planning to capture the way he looked when he was genuinely curious about something—that slight tilt of his head, that intensity in his gaze. But I'd stopped. Left it incomplete. Because maybe that was the truth—that we were something unfinished, never quite arriving at color.

The title was a confession. Two words that encompassed everything—the panic attack, the screaming, the moment I'd thrown him out instead of asking him to stay. The messages I'd drafted and deleted. The apology I couldn't seem to send directly but could somehow offer here, in the language of my work.

Tomorrow, Est would photograph that painting. Would stand in front of it, camera raised, and see his own half-formed face staring back at him with those two words as the title.

What would he think? Would he understand that I'd painted him because I couldn't stop thinking about him? Would he recognize that leaving the portrait unfinished was its own kind of honesty? Would he see, in the careful charcoal lines, the hours I'd spent studying his face, trying to capture something true?

Or would he photograph it with the same professional detachment he'd brought to every session since our falling out, and move on to the next piece without feeling anything at all?

The not-knowing was unbearable.

I walked to the window of the studio—smaller than the ones in the living room, but still offering a view of the city below. The afternoon traffic was building, cars crawling through streets I hadn't walked in years. Somewhere out there, Est was probably preparing for tomorrow too. Checking his equipment, reviewing the schedule, being the professional he'd always been.

Did he think about me at all?

Did the painting of his hands mean anything to him beyond a gesture of apology from a difficult client?

I pressed my palm against the cool glass and let myself miss him.

It was a particular kind of missing—not the sharp, immediate grief of loss, but the dull ache of absence. The way you miss something that was never quite yours to begin with. I'd had one kiss with Est. One moment of connection, one night when I'd let him see behind the mask. And then I'd retreated, let the fear win, pushed him away with silence and distance until there was nothing left between us but professional emails and the particular formality of two people pretending they'd never meant anything to each other.

I'd been so afraid of being seen. Afraid that if Est looked too closely, he'd see how broken I actually was and leave. So I'd controlled the ending—had pushed first, had created the distance myself, had convinced myself that it was better to be alone by choice than alone by rejection.

But I'd been wrong.

The loneliness hadn't been better. It had been devastating. And now I was standing in an empty studio, surrounded by the ghosts of paintings that told the story of my grief, wishing I'd been brave enough to let him stay.

My phone buzzed at noon.

Lego: On my way. I'm bringing supplies. Don't argue.

I smiled despite myself. Lego had been like this for weeks—checking in constantly, showing up with things I hadn't asked for, refusing to let me retreat into isolation the way I had so many times before. It was simultaneously annoying and deeply comforting.

Me: What kind of supplies?

Lego: The kind that will make you look like a real person at your exhibition instead of someone who's been hiding in a cave for three years.

Me: I resemble that remark.

Lego: Exactly. See you in 20.

I set down the phone and looked around the apartment—taking inventory of the state of things. Lego had helped me clean last week, so the space was more organized than it had been in years. The kitchen was tidy, dishes put away. The living room was arranged properly, furniture positioned for actual sitting rather than avoiding. Even the studio, empty now of paintings, had been swept and ordered.

The suit I'd chosen for tomorrow was hanging in my closet—I was as prepared as I was going to be.

It still didn't feel like enough.

Lego arrived exactly twenty minutes later, carrying a large bag that clinked with mysterious contents. The knee brace was still visible—but he was moving more easily than he had been.

"I come bearing gifts," he announced, setting the bag on my kitchen counter with purpose. "And solutions."

"Solutions to what?"

"Your hair, for one thing." He pulled out scissors and a set of clippers, setting them on the counter with the authority of someone who had a plan. "You look like you've been lost in the wilderness for six months. We can't have that at your exhibition."

I touched my hair self-consciously. "I was going to figure something out."

"You were going to panic about it tomorrow morning and end up wearing a hat." Lego pointed to one of the dining chairs. "Sit. Trust the process."

"You're going to cut my hair?"

"I've been dying my own hair for years. Cutting yours can't be that difficult." He spread a towel over my shoulders with practiced efficiency. "Besides, do you really want to go to a salon right now? With everything else?"

He had a point. The thought of sitting in a stranger's chair, making small talk, explaining who I was and why I needed to look presentable—it was too much. Lego's apartment, with its familiarity and safety, was infinitely preferable.

I sat down. Lego circled me slowly, studying my hair from different angles. His fingers combed through the tangled strands, assessing length and texture.

"When's the last time you actually had this cut?"

"I don't remember. Months ago, maybe. Before—" I stopped. Before everything fell

apart. Before the breakdown. Before I stopped caring what I looked like because I wasn't seeing anyone anyway.

"That's what I thought." Lego picked up the scissors. "Close your eyes. This is going to be therapeutic."

I closed my eyes. The first snip of the scissors was surprisingly gentle. Lego worked slowly, carefully, cutting small sections at a time. The sound was oddly soothing—the rhythmic click of metal, the soft fall of hair onto my shoulders.

"Hong's exhibition went well." Lego said as he worked.

"That's wonderful." I meant it. I'd seen Hong's paintings during one of my rare ventures out—the trial run to my own gallery had included a brief stop at the university exhibition. His work was honest in a way that reminded me of my own, though his honesty took different shapes. "How's he feeling?"

"Relieved, mostly. The exposure was hard for him—all those strangers looking at his soul. But he survived it." Lego's fingers combed through another section of hair. "Sound familiar?"

"Very."

"He's with Nut now. Like, officially. They're taking it slow, but—" I could hear the smile in Lego's voice. "It's good. It's really good to see Hong letting someone in."

"I'm glad."

"Me too." Another snip of the scissors. "Speaking of letting people in—"

"Don't."

"I wasn't going to say anything about Est."

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking that tomorrow is going to be complicated, and you should probably have a plan for how to handle seeing him."

I opened my eyes. Lego had moved around to face me, scissors paused mid-cut, his expression gentle but serious.

"I don't have a plan," I admitted. "I don't know how to have a plan. Every time I try to think about seeing him, my brain just—stops. Like hitting a wall."

"Then don't think about it." Lego resumed cutting. "Just focus on getting through the speech, getting through the opening, and letting everything else happen naturally."

"What if 'naturally' means falling apart in front of him?"

"Then you fall apart, and you survive it, and you move on." Lego's voice was matter-of-fact. "You've fallen apart before. You're still here."

"That's not very comforting."

"It's realistic. Close your eyes again—I'm doing the back."

I closed my eyes.

We worked in silence for a few minutes, the rhythm of the scissors filling the space. Then Lego spoke again, his voice softer now.

"I've been thinking about my birthday. About everything that happened."

"The party?"

"The party. Tui's gift. The conversation we had afterward." He paused. Lego's face lit up. "It was amazing, P'Will. They decorated the whole studio—hearts and stars everywhere, the exact colors I would have chosen. And the cake was shaped like a star, with these little edible flowers..."

He talked for a while about the party—about Tui's last-minute panic, about the Alice in Wonderland tea set that had made him cry, about the group of friends who had gathered to celebrate him. His voice carried the particular warmth of someone who had been surprised by love, who still couldn't quite believe that people would go to such trouble on his behalf.

I listened. Asked questions. Laughed in the right places.

This was what Lego needed from me—not just acceptance of his support, but genuine interest in his life. I'd been failing at that for years, too wrapped up in my own grief to pay attention to the person who was holding me together.

I was trying to be better. Trying to be the kind of friend he deserved. My chest tightened. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Don't be sorry. Be proud." Another snip of the scissors. "You're different now, P'Will. You're healing. And I wanted you to know that I see it."

I didn't know what to say. The acknowledgment landed somewhere deep—a recognition of progress I couldn't always see from the inside.

"Tell me about Tui," I said, changing the subject because the emotion was too big. "You said you're official now?"

Lego's whole energy shifted—a particular brightness entering his voice that hadn't been there before.

"We're boyfriends." The word came out like he was still testing how it felt. "Like,



actually boyfriends. He asked me properly, the night of my showcase. After everything—after I nearly collapsed backstage and—he asked if I would be his boyfriend."

"And you said yes."

"I said yes so fast I probably scared him." Lego laughed. "But he just smiled."

"He's patient."

"He's everything." The weight of the word settled in the air. "I didn't know it could be like this, P'Will. I didn't know love could feel—safe. Like being held instead of grasped. Like being seen instead of performed for."

I thought about Est. About the way he'd looked at me during those early photography sessions, like I was something worth studying. About the particular attention he'd paid—not to the "reclusive genius" persona, but to the actual person underneath.

I'd had that. Briefly. And I'd pushed it away.

"I'm happy for you," I said, and I meant it. "You deserve someone who sees you like that."

"So do you."

"Lego—"

"I know. I said I wasn't going to bring up Est." The scissors paused. "But I want you to know—whatever happens tomorrow, whatever he says or doesn't say, you're still worth seeing. You're still worth loving. Even if Est isn't ready to be the one who does it."

My eyes were burning. I kept them closed, letting Lego finish the haircut, letting the emotion pass through me without trying to control it.

"How's your knee?" I asked, redirecting again. "You're moving better."

"Physical therapy is helping. The doctor says another four weeks of reduced activity and I should be back to normal." He moved to a different section of hair. "Well, normal for me. Which apparently means 'overworking myself until something breaks.'"

"Tui must love that."

"Tui has threatened to physically restrain me if I dance before I'm cleared." Lego's voice carried affection. "He worries. It's sweet and also annoying."

"That's what love is, isn't it? Sweet and also annoying."

"Says the man who's been pining for months."

"I haven't been pining."

"P'Will. You painted his hands. You sent him a portrait of himself with the title 'I'm Sorry.' You're going to stand in a gallery tomorrow surrounded by evidence of how much you've been thinking about him." Lego came around to face me again, scissors lowered. "That's pining."

I opened my eyes. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to everyone who knows you."

"Will Est see it? When he looks at the paintings?"

Lego was quiet for a moment. "I think he'll see something. Whether he interprets it the way you want him to—" He shrugged. "That's not something you can control."

"I know." I looked down at the pile of hair on the towel draped across my shoulders. "I just want—I don't know what I want. I want him to understand. I want him to know that I've changed. I want—"

"A second chance."

"Is that too much to hope for?"

"Hope isn't about being realistic, P'Will. It's about what keeps you going." Lego picked up the clippers. "Now hold still. I need to clean up the edges."

The afternoon passed too quickly and too slowly at the same time.

When Lego finished with my hair, I looked in the mirror and saw someone different. Not dramatically transformed—the cut was simple, practical, just shorter and neater than before—but somehow more present. More intentional. Less like someone who had given up on themselves.

"Better," Lego said, surveying his work with satisfaction. "Now you look like an artist instead of a hermit."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. We still need to go through your emergency supplies."

He produced a small bag from his larger one—the kind of thing you might pack for a long trip, carefully organized with compartments for different items. Over the next hour, we filled it together:

My medication—the anti-anxiety pills Dr. Chaisri had prescribed, the backup dose in case I needed it.

Water—a small bottle, because dehydration made anxiety worse.

Breath mints—"for after the panic breathing," Lego explained matter-of-factly.

The index cards with my coping strategies written in careful print—breathing techniques on one, grounding exercises on another, a list of people I could text if things became too much.

A small photograph of my mother, tucked into a side pocket where I could reach it if I needed to remember why I was doing this. Lego quizzed me on the floor plan of the gallery, reminding me where the exits were, where I could retreat if things became too much.

"And you have the signal with your manager?"

"If I need extraction, I put my hand on my chest. She'll see it and create a distraction."

"Good. And if you can't find her?"

"I find you. Or I go to the bathroom and text."

"Good." He nodded, satisfied. "You're prepared, P'Will. You've done everything right."

"It doesn't feel like enough."

"It never does. But you're doing it anyway. That's the whole thing."

After Lego left, the apartment felt emptier than usual. I sat at my desk—the same desk where I'd written seventeen versions of my speech—and read through the current draft one more time. The words blurred together, familiar from repetition but still somehow foreign. I could recite them from memory, but I wasn't sure I could say them with meaning. Wasn't sure I could stand in front of a room full of strangers and make them understand what I'd been trying to create.

The ending was wrong.

I'd known it for days, but I hadn't been able to figure out how to fix it. The speech built toward a conclusion about "Absence & Light" as a concept—about the balance between grief and hope, about the way darkness and illumination existed together. But it felt abstract. Distant. Like I was describing something I'd read about rather than something I'd lived.

I picked up my pen and started to write. The words came more easily now. I wrote about the light—not as an abstract concept, but as a specific, tangible thing. The people who stayed. The connections that survived. The possibility of healing, not

because the grief disappeared, but because it learned to coexist with hope.

I wrote about my mother's garden. About the flowers she'd tried to teach me to love, the knowledge I'd refused to learn, and the way it had found me anyway—through Lego, through paint, through the thousands of blooms now rendered in oil on a canvas that bore her face.

I wrote about absence. About the empty spaces left behind when someone dies, the silence that fills the rooms they used to occupy. But also about how those spaces could be filled—not replaced, but transformed. How light could find its way through the cracks.

I thought about Est with every word.

The painting of his hands was in his apartment now. Evidence of my attention, my care, my desperate hope that he might understand what I couldn't say directly. Tomorrow, he would photograph my other works—the portrait titled "I'm Sorry," the chaos pieces, my mother surrounded by flowers. He would see the exhibition I'd been building for years, the visual record of my grief and my healing.

Would he recognize himself in any of it?

Would he see, in the particular quality of the light I'd learned to capture, the influence his presence had on my work? I didn't know. Couldn't know. All I could do was show up tomorrow, speak the words I'd written, and let him decide what to do with what he saw.

The night deepened around me. I took the medication Dr. Chaisri had prescribed—the small pill that was supposed to ease the anxiety enough for sleep. I went through the rituals: brushing teeth, washing face, checking locks, the particular sequence of actions that anchored me to routine. The bedroom was dark when I lay down, the city lights filtering through the curtains in familiar patterns. I'd memorized those patterns over three years of sleepless nights, watching the way shadows moved across my ceiling, counting the seconds until dawn.

But tonight was different. Tomorrow was coming whether I was ready or not. The exhibition would open. The speech would be given. Est would be there with his camera, documenting everything. And I would finally, after three years of hiding, step into the light.

I thought about my mother.

About the garden she'd never finished growing. About the way she'd believed in me, even when I couldn't believe in myself. About the hours she'd spent in her flower shop, trying to teach me the names of things I'd been too distracted to learn, knowledge that Lego had absorbed and I had refused. She would have been there tomorrow. Front row, probably, wearing something bright that would stand out in the

photographs. She would have cried during my speech—she always cried at meaningful things—and then she would have hugged me and told me she was proud, regardless of what the critics said.

The absence of her was literal now. Rendered in paint, hanging on gallery walls, the subject of an exhibition named for what she'd left behind.

Go be brave.

I was trying.

I thought about Est.

About his hands holding a rose. About the way he'd looked at me once, before I'd destroyed everything, like I was something worth looking at. About the particular attention he'd paid during those early sessions, seeing past the "genius" persona to the broken person underneath.

He'd offered me something real. Connection. Understanding. The possibility of being known and not rejected for it. And I'd pushed him away because I was too afraid to accept it.

I was trying. Every day, I was trying. Tomorrow would be the biggest proof of that—standing in public, speaking my truth, letting the world see the mess I'd made and the healing I'd begun. Maybe Est would see it too. Maybe the exhibition would say what I couldn't put into words. Maybe he'd stand in front of the portrait I'd titled "I'm Sorry" and understand what I'd been trying to communicate.

Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe the distance between us had grown too great to bridge. Maybe I'd lost my chance, and all I could do now was accept that and move forward anyway.

I thought about Lego. About golden light and Wednesday flowers. About the particular grace of someone who refuses to give up on you, even when you've given up on yourself. About the friendship we'd rebuilt on healthier ground, the conversations we had now that weren't just about my needs, the genuine interest I'd learned to show in his life.

I'm not going anywhere, he'd said.

Neither was I. Not anymore.

The anxiety was still there—would probably always be there, in some form. The fear of tomorrow pressed against my chest like a weight I couldn't quite lift. But beneath it was something else. Something that might have been resolve.

I was going to show up.

I was going to speak the words I'd written.

I was going to let strangers examine my grief, let critics judge my work, let the whole machinery of the art world churn around the most vulnerable pieces of myself. And somewhere in the middle of it all, I was going to find Est. I was going to look him in the eye. And I was going to hope—fragile, desperate, probably foolish hope—that he would see something in me worth seeing.

Sleep came eventually. Not peacefully—nothing about me was peaceful—but completely. The medication helped. The exhaustion helped more. And somewhere in the depths of the night, the anxiety gave way to something like surrender, the acceptance that tomorrow would happen whether I was awake to worry about it or not.

The exhibition was waiting.

Est was waiting.

The world was waiting and I was finally ready to be seen.

Everything I got from you

—"Everything I got from you

All of it was false, it all became false."

Est

The morning light fell across the painting on my desk like an accusation. I'd been staring at it for almost an hour now—William's painting of my hands, cradling a rose rendered in soft gold and gray. The brushstrokes were careful, intentional, capturing something I hadn't known he'd noticed. The way my fingers curved. The particular gentleness I used when holding fragile things. Evidence that someone had been watching, paying attention, seeing me in ways I hadn't realized I was being seen.

I should have put it away. Should have tucked it into a closet, hidden it from view, protected myself from the daily reminder of everything we'd been and everything we'd failed to become. That's what Dr. Siriporn would probably suggest—creating distance from triggers, building boundaries, practicing self-preservation. But I couldn't.

Every morning, I looked at those painted hands. Every morning, I remembered the letter that had come with the painting—seventeen drafts' worth of apology, he'd said. Every morning, I thought about the man who had created this, alone in his glass tower, trying to find a way to say what he couldn't say directly.

Thank you. Keep trying.

That's what I'd written back, words that had taken me two hours to compose, because everything else felt like too much or not enough. Three words that left the door cracked open without inviting him through.

And now, tomorrow, I would have to face him.

The thought made my hands shake.

My camera bag sat by the door, already packed for the exhibition. I'd done it last night, going through the ritual of preparation that had always calmed me: checking lenses, formatting memory cards, charging batteries, organizing everything into its proper place. The bag was smaller than my usual kit—I'd chosen it deliberately, something unobtrusive that wouldn't draw attention, that would let me move through the gallery without being noticed. As if being unnoticed was possible when I was photographing William Jakrapatr's return to the art world.

The exhibition opened tomorrow. "Absence & Light"—a title that felt too apt, too loaded with meaning I didn't want to examine. I'd been contracted to document the opening night, to capture the crowds and the reactions and the particular spectacle of a reclusive genius finally emerging from three years of hiding.

I'd also be photographing William himself.

The thought sent ice through my veins.

I'd done it before—the promotional sessions, the artist portraits. Professional work, carefully distanced, camera raised like a shield between us. I'd treated him like any other client because that's what I needed to do to survive. Had focused on lighting and composition and the technical details that kept me from feeling anything.

But tomorrow would be different. Tomorrow, there would be crowds. Speeches. The particular chaos of an opening night where emotions ran high and masks slipped. Tomorrow, I would have to navigate his presence while documenting his triumph, capturing his vulnerability for public consumption while protecting my own.

I wasn't sure I could do it.

The progress I'd made in therapy—the boundaries I'd learned to build, the self-worth I'd begun to cultivate, the understanding that I was allowed to protect myself—all of it felt fragile now. Insufficient. Like a house of cards that one wrong breath could scatter.

What if I saw him and everything I'd worked for dissolved?

What if he looked at me with those eyes—those terrified, hopeful, devastatingly honest eyes—and I fell apart?

What if he asked for forgiveness, and I gave it before I was ready, and I ended up exactly where I'd started: chasing storms, desperate for validation, losing myself in someone else's chaos?

What if he apologizes again?

What if he doesn't?

What if I look at him and forget everything I've learned?

I pressed my palms against my eyes and breathed.

I am having the thought that I might fall back into old patterns.

I am having the thought that my progress isn't real.

I am having the thought that loving William means losing myself.

You are not the same person you were six months ago, I reminded myself. You've done the work. You've changed.

But the fear whispered back: Have you changed enough?

The apartment felt too small suddenly. Too quiet. Too full of the particular silence that came from being alone with thoughts that wouldn't stop spiraling. I looked at the painting again—my hands, the rose, the evidence of William's attention—and I couldn't stand it anymore.

I needed to get out.

I grabbed my jacket and my keys, leaving the camera bag behind. This wasn't about work. This was about survival.

The bus to Ink & Ashes was familiar by now—a route I'd traveled dozens of times over the years of knowing Tui, more frequently in recent months as I'd leaned on our friendship to get through the worst of everything. The studio had become a kind of second home, a place where I could exist without performing, where the people who cared about me gathered and created and held space for each other's messiness.

But when I arrived, the lights were off. A small "Closed" sign hung in the window, the interior visible through the glass—sparkling clean, equipment neatly arranged, chairs empty and waiting. The studio looked like it was taking a breath, resting before whatever came next.



But I knew Tui wouldn't have gone far. Tui's apartment was above the studio. He'd mentioned once that he closed early sometimes, on days when he needed the quiet, when the weight of other people's needs became too heavy to carry. I understood that impulse more now than I ever had before.

I walked around to the side of the building, to the narrow staircase that led up to his door.

Halfway up the stairs, I noticed something new. A small pot sat on one of the steps—purple flowers I couldn't identify, the petals delicate and slightly luminous in the afternoon light. The pot was decorated with wooden owl ornaments, tiny carved faces peering out from among the stems. It was exactly the kind of thing Lego would create—whimsical and careful and full of meaning I couldn't quite parse.

The sight of it made something in my chest ease slightly.

This was what healing looked like, I reminded myself. Not grand gestures or dramatic transformations, but small things: a pot of flowers on a staircase, a closed sign in a window, the willingness to create beauty even in spaces people might not notice.

I climbed the rest of the stairs.

Before I could knock, I heard voices from inside.

Lego's laughter came through the door—loud and bright, the particular sound of someone genuinely delighted by something. And then Tui's voice, slightly annoyed but warm underneath: "Hong, be careful. His knee's still not right."

I smiled despite myself.

Three knocks. Then I opened the door.

The apartment was warm and lived-in, the particular comfort of a space that held regular visitors. Tui was in the small kitchen, doing something with a coffee maker, and on the sofa—

Hong was lying with his head in Lego's lap.

It was such an unexpected image that I stopped in the doorway, taking it in. Hong, usually so reserved, so carefully contained, sprawled across the cushions with his eyes half-closed and his phone held loosely in one hand. Lego above him, fingers absently playing with Hong's silver hair, looking more rested than I'd seen him in weeks.

"Est!" Tui's face broke into a smile when he saw me. "Come in. I was just making

coffee."

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. "I didn't know everyone would be here."

"Neither did I," Tui admitted. "They showed up an hour ago. Hong wanted a change of scenery."

"Lego wanted to check on you," Hong corrected without opening his eyes. "I'm just along for the ride."

"You invited yourself," Lego said, flicking Hong's forehead gently. "Don't pretend you didn't."

Hong's response was to stick his tongue out at Tui as Tui settled onto the arm of the sofa. The gesture was so unexpectedly childish, so at odds with Hong's usual careful composure, that I found myself smiling.

This was what I'd come for. This ease. This comfort. This reminder that I wasn't alone, that I had people who would hold space for me even when I couldn't articulate what I needed.

Tui handed me a cup of coffee, and I sank into one of the armchairs. The cushions were worn and soft, molding to my body like a familiar embrace.

"You look tired." Lego observed, studying my face with that particular attention he brought to everything. He looked better than the last time I'd seen him—the shadows under his eyes less pronounced, his skin healthier, his whole energy lighter. He was wearing a t-shirt I recognized as Tui's, the oversized fit making him look smaller and more comfortable.

"I am tired," I admitted. "I've been thinking too much."

"About tomorrow?"

The question landed like a stone in still water. Hong opened his eyes, looking up at me from his position on Lego's lap. Even he was wearing makeup today—something light and subtle, a hint of color on his cheekbones that I'd never seen him wear before.

"Yeah," I said. "About tomorrow."

Tui's hand found my shoulder, a brief squeeze of solidarity. He knew. He'd been there through all of it—the spiral after William pushed me away, the long months of therapy and self-discovery, the particular kind of grief that came from losing something that had never quite been yours.

"Have you eaten?" Lego asked.

"No."

"Then we should get food." Hong sat up suddenly, dislodging himself from Lego's lap with a groan of protest from the smaller boy. "I want ice cream."

"It's three in the afternoon." Tui pointed out.

"And?" Hong looked at him with an expression that dared him to argue. "I want ice cream."

Tui sighed—a dramatic, long-suffering sound that carried no real complaint. "Okay."

He stood, and I found myself standing too. "I'll walk with you," I heard myself say. "I could use the air."

Hong's smile was knowing, but he didn't comment. Tui just kissed Lego's hand—a gesture so tender it made my chest ache—and grabbed his phone and wallet from the coffee table.

"No roughhousing, Hong," Tui warned from the doorway. "His knee."

"I'm not going to roughhouse. I'm going to lie here and look pretty."

"That's what I'm worried about."

Hong waved a dismissive hand. "I'm an angel."

"You're a chaos gremlin."

"Same thing."

I followed Tui out the door, Lego's bright laughter echoing behind us.

The street outside Ink & Ashes was quieter than usual, the afternoon heat keeping most people indoors. We walked side by side, not speaking at first, letting the rhythm of our steps fill the silence. This was what I'd always loved about Tui. He didn't need to fill every moment with words. He could be present without demanding anything, offering companionship that required no performance.

"How are you really?" he asked eventually. "Not the version you tell everyone. The real version."

I considered the question. Considered lying, deflecting, giving the surface answer that I was fine and everything was under control. But this was Tui. He'd known me since university. He'd seen me at my worst and hadn't run.

"I'm terrified," I admitted. "About tomorrow. About seeing him."

"William."

The name hung in the air between us.

"I keep thinking about everything I've worked on in therapy. The boundaries. The self-worth stuff. Dr. Siriporn says I've made real progress, and I believe her—most of the time, anyway. But—" I stopped walking, turning to face him. "What if it all falls apart when I see him?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—" I struggled for words. "I still love him, Tui. That's the thing that kills me. After everything he did, after the way he pushed me away, after all these months of working on myself—I still love him. And I'm scared that the moment he looks at me, the moment he asks for forgiveness, I'll just... give in. I'll forgive him before I'm ready. I'll let him back in before I've built the walls I need. And I'll end up exactly where I started."

Tui was quiet for a moment, processing this.

"Is that what happened before?" he asked gently. "With other people?"

I thought about the pattern Dr. Siriporn had helped me identify. The way I'd always chased unavailable people—storms, she'd called them. Beautiful and intense and ultimately destructive. The way I'd lost myself in trying to earn their attention, their approval, their love.

"Yeah," I said. "That's what always happened. I'd give and give until there was nothing left of me. And then when they left—which they always did—I had to figure out who I was again from scratch."

"And you're afraid William is the same?"

"I'm afraid I am the same." The admission came out raw. "I'm afraid I don't know how to love someone without losing myself. I'm afraid that all the work I've done, all the therapy and the growth and the learning to see my own worth—I'm afraid it won't be enough. That one moment of weakness will undo everything."

Tui put his hand on my shoulder. We were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, pedestrians flowing around us, but I barely noticed.

"Can I tell you something?" he said.

"What?"

"You're already different. Not because you've finished healing—no one ever finishes healing—but because you can see the pattern. You can name it. You can articulate exactly what you're afraid of and why." He squeezed my shoulder. "Six months ago,

you couldn't have had this conversation. You would have been so deep in the obsession that you couldn't see the edges of it."

"That doesn't mean I won't fall again."

"Maybe you will. Maybe you won't. But falling isn't the same as failing." His eyes were kind. "You're not trying to be perfect, Est. You're trying to be present. To make choices from a place of clarity instead of desperation. And tomorrow, whatever happens with William, you'll make choices. Some might be good. Some might be mistakes. But you'll be aware of what you're doing, and that's more than you could say before."

I blinked against the burning in my eyes. "What if I'm not strong enough?"

"Then you lean on us. That's what we're here for." Tui smiled. "You think Lego got through his showcase alone? You think Hong survived his exhibition without support? We're not meant to do hard things alone. That's the whole point of having people."

The word settled into my chest—warm and steadying. People. Chosen family. The particular grace of not being alone, even when loneliness felt inevitable.

"Listen to me," he said. "What you've built over the past months—the therapy, the routines, the boundaries you're learning to set—that doesn't disappear just because William walks into a room. It's part of you now. It goes wherever you go."

"Thank you." I said.

"Don't thank me. Just let me help you survive tomorrow. That's all I ask."

We walked to the convenience store, the conversation shifting to lighter topics. Tui told me about the studio—a new client who'd commissioned a full back piece, a design he was particularly proud of. He talked about Hong and Nut, the relationship that was slowly becoming official, the way Hong's walls were gradually lowering in ways that surprised everyone.

"And Lego?" I asked. "How's his knee really?"

"Healing." Tui's voice carried complicated layers. "He pushes too hard—you've seen him. But he's listening more now. Actually resting when he's supposed to, instead of just pretending to rest while sneaking off to dance."

"Because of you?"

"Because he finally has a reason to take care of himself." Tui's expression softened. "That's what love does, I think. When it's healthy. It makes you want to be better—

not for the other person, but for yourself, so you can show up for them properly."

I thought about that. About the difference between losing yourself in someone else and choosing to grow alongside them. About the version of love I'd been chasing my whole life versus the version Tui and Lego were building together.

"I want that," I admitted quietly. "Someday. When I'm ready."

"You'll have it. I really believe that."

In the convenience store, we bought far more ice cream than four people needed—multiple flavors, different brands, the kind of excessive purchasing that happened when you had friends to feed and didn't want to disappoint anyone. I noticed Tui picking up things from the toiletries section—toothbrush, soap, items that suggested someone was staying over regularly—but I didn't comment. Some things didn't need to be said aloud.

When we got back to the apartment, the atmosphere had shifted. Lego and Hong were no longer on the sofa. Instead, they'd migrated to Tui's bed, visible through the open bedroom door. Lego lay on his back, staring at the ceiling, while Hong was on his stomach beside him, chin propped on his hands. They were talking quietly—I couldn't hear the words, but the tone was intimate, the kind of conversation that happened between people who trusted each other with vulnerable things.

Hong looked up when we entered, his expression shifting instantly.

"Ice cream!" The word came out with the particular enthusiasm of someone deliberately changing the subject. "What flavors did you get?"

"All of them," Tui said dryly. "Because some of us have no impulse control."

"I requested one flavor."

"You requested 'ice cream' without specifications. That leaves everything open to interpretation."

Lego sat up more slowly, wincing slightly as he adjusted his leg. The knee brace was visible beneath his borrowed clothes.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"Better." He smiled—a real smile, not the performative brightness I'd seen from him in the past. "P'Tui's been making me rest. Actually rest. It's annoying but probably necessary."

We gathered in the small living room—Lego and Hong emerging from the bedroom, Tui distributing containers and spoons, the four of us settling into comfortable

positions with our cold treats. The conversation flowed easily now, touching on everything and nothing: Hong's upcoming solo show, Lego's physical therapy progress, a movie Tui had watched last week that had made him cry unexpectedly.

I let the warmth of it wash over me.

This was what I had now. This was what I'd built while William's absence had threatened to hollow me out. Friends who showed up. People who cared about me without needing me to earn it. A foundation that didn't depend on anyone's approval, anyone's attention, anyone's inconsistent love. Whatever happened tomorrow, I would still have this. The thought steadied me in ways I hadn't expected.

"You're thinking again," Tui observed, watching me from his position curled against Lego's side. "That face you make when you're spiraling but trying to hide it."

"I'm not spiraling."

"You're pre-spiraling. It's a stage."

"Is 'pre-spiraling' a technical term?"

"It is now." He smiled, gentle despite the teasing. "Want to talk about it?"

I considered the offer. Looked around at the faces watching me—Tui's steady presence, Hong's unexpected softness, Lego's bright concern.

"Tomorrow is going to be hard," I said finally. "But I think I'm ready. Or close enough to ready that the difference doesn't matter."

"That's very evolved of you." Hong said.

"I've been in therapy."

"It shows."

We finished our ice cream. The afternoon light shifted, evening approaching with the gradual dimming that Bangkok did better than anywhere else. I should have been heading home—preparing for tomorrow, getting proper rest, doing all the sensible things a professional would do before a major event. But I didn't want to leave yet.

"Can I stay a little longer?" I asked. "I'm not ready to be alone with my thoughts."

"Stay as long as you want," Tui said. "We were just going to watch something stupid and not think about tomorrow."

"That sounds perfect."

So I stayed. Watched something stupid on Tui's laptop, crammed onto the sofa with

three other people, letting the warmth of their presence anchor me to the present moment.

Tomorrow would come whether I was ready or not.

But tonight, I wasn't alone. And that was enough to get me through.

I left around 9 PM, taking the bus back to my apartment with a container of leftover ice cream and a lighter heart than I'd arrived with.

The painting was still on my desk when I got home. My hands, holding a rose. Evidence of attention I hadn't known I was receiving.

I looked at it for a long time.

Then I did something I hadn't done before. I picked it up, carefully, and carried it to the corner of my room where the resurrection plant sat on its small table—fully green now, reaching toward the light from my window.

I set the painting beside it. Two gifts from complicated people. Two reminders that growth was possible, that things that looked dead could learn to be alive again.

I was trying.

Tomorrow, I would face William. Would stand in a gallery full of his grief made visible, documenting his return to the world, navigating whatever feelings arose without losing myself in them. It would be hard. It might be devastating. But I would survive it because I had people who would catch me if I fell, and I had finally learned to let them.

I got ready for bed. Went through the familiar rituals—brushing teeth, washing face, the particular sequence of actions that anchored me to routine.

The resurrection plant caught the last of the streetlight filtering through my curtains. Its leaves were green and full, reaching upward, doing the slow and patient work of being alive.

I understood now what Lego had meant when he gave it to me.

Some things that look dead are just waiting. Just needing the right conditions to remember how to grow.

I had been waiting. And now I was growing.

Tomorrow would be what it would be. I would see William. I would photograph his exhibition. I would feel whatever I felt and make whatever choices I made. But I wouldn't disappear. I wouldn't lose myself. I wouldn't become the person who



chased storms at the expense of my own survival.

Because I was the resurrection plant. I was the rose held gently in painted hands. I was the person who had learned, finally, that being seen by someone else was wonderful—but seeing yourself was essential.

I closed my eyes.

And for the first time in weeks, I slept without dreaming of William at all.